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SHANGRI-LA

Semi-Tropical Valley Would Make Fine Resort

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By G. A. SCHIERHOLTZ

A Correspondent of the Herald

THE Kootenay Plains, a semi-tropical valley beyond the first range of mountains, a hundred miles west of Rocky Mountain House, is one of the most curious valleys of the Rockies. It is about 20 miles long and three-quarters of a mile to two miles wide, on both sides of the North Saskatchewan River, but the best pasture is on the south side.

Fifty miles north of Lake Louise, where snow piles up to 30 feet in winter, snow rarely lasts more than a day or two on the Plains, before a warm Chinook sweeps through the Howse Pass. During the time when the original survey was made and later, when the Nordegg-Windy Point highway was under construction (relief camp labor for three years) temperature records were kept at several points and checked with Nordegg.

These showed that, on an average, the temperature at Nordegg was about five degrees colder than at the Bighorn camp, 14 miles west, and that in turn was about five degrees colder than at Windy Point, twelve miles on, where the Plains begin. It was warmer again at Whirlpool Point.

Besides the temperature always being from 15 to 25 degrees warmer than at Nordegg or Rocky Mountain House, cold spells never last any length of time on the Plains.

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In this sheltered valley, buffalo grass grows thick, stock winters outside and the animals wax fat and sleek.

David Thompson's records of his exploration trip that led to the discovery of the Columbia River, tell that he spent one winter, around 1806, on the Kootenay Plains (he spelled it "Kutenai") where he was very comfortable, but it was a long, hard winter beyond the warm valley, and game was very scarce. They killed and ate wild horses which were very plentiful. The Indians taught them to make "moss bread" from moss they gathered off the trees.

Stoney Indians live on the Plains and insist that their people have lived there "since the world began." Certainly, there is no record of them ever living anywhere else. When they accepted treaty at Gleichen over 60 years ago, they claim they did not know that the Great White Mother expected them to leave their homes and move to the reserve at Morley. And they did not move, and insist that they never will!

They belong to the Morley reserve, they send their children there to school, they go down to visit, but they always return to their homes on the Plains. They accept treaty, but the agent has to come to Nordegg to give it out. They have been agitating to have the government give them the land for a reserve "before the white man grabs it," but so far nothing has been done.

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One might wonder why the white man has not gone in with stock to this favored valley. Two did, in the early days. The Wilson Bros., of Banff, started a horse ranch there on the south side of the river around the turn of the century, when all supplies had to be freighted over the Stoney Indian trail from Banff, on pack horses.

A man named Barnes also went in from Banff and settled on the north side of the river.

Apparently these ranches prospered, but the valley is very isolated, and so small that there never could be many neighbors; and getting supplies in, and stock out to market, was tiring and expensive, so 20 years ago both ranchers abandoned the idea.

Wild horses abound on the Plains, and in neighboring valleys. Evidently they were there over 135 years ago, when David Thompson travelled that way, but no one can say just how the herd started. Indians tell that "three-four hundred years ago," some of their horses wandered off, which is the most likely explanation, though historians think they have added at least a few years onto the time!

Every fall, Indians round these wild horses up, and sell them to buyers who come in to Nordegg just to buy them. It is a profitable business for the Indians, whatever they get when they sell a wild horse is clear profit, for their time isn't worth much, anyway.

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There is an old log cabin at the west side of the Plains, called Foundation Cabin, and it is claimed that the story "River's End" by James Oliver Curwood, was based on happenings in that cabin, to which a Mountie finally tracked his man. The cabin still stands in good repair. The story concludes with the hero and his bride crossing the Plains to the cabin.

Not far from this cabin, there is an old tree with David Thompson's name and the date, 1806, carved on it. There are plans afoot to have this tree fenced and preserved.

Half way across the Plains, opposite the old Wilson ranch, is an aerial ferry, built years ago by the federal government and now kept up by the provincial forestry department. If you don't want to risk fording the river on a horse (a very dangerous undertaking for any greenhorn) and can't swim it, you may climb the steel tower, step into the cage that is strung on a cable, release it and zip, the cage speeds down to where the cable curves upward again.

The last half of the journey, you pull yourself and the cage hand over hand along the cable. Hard work, and a bit scary, but you can negotiate a safe crossing that way. Forest rangers use it, but most travellers are afraid of the contraption.

Many a horse has been drowned fording the river, but strangely enough, no one can recall a rider drowning. Most of the animals losing their lives have been pack horses. A rider can leap to a sandbar if he is quick enough, and be rescued by a companion. Few try fording when alone.

Several years ago, when the depression was at its worst, a party went up the White Goat River, a branch of the Saskatchewan, to pan for gold. They worked hard all summer, but did not make expenses. Trappers don't lay out trap lines on the Plains. While there are plenty of fur bearing animals all around, they seem to avoid the Plains, likely because of the warm climate.

Men who have been there in the winter, claim that a wonderful resort could be made there—an "Idaho Sun Valley" right here in central Alberta, with lodges down in the warm valley and every winter sport possible on the snow covered Rockies that rise up on every side.

The proposed David Thompson highway, west from Rocky Mountain House to join the Banff-Jasper road 50 miles north of Lake Louise, will traverse the Kootenay Plains.

Clipping from Calgary Herald

And a Barrel of Rum

By G. A. SCHIERHOLTZ

THE two stone chimneys of the old fort at Rocky Mountain House were restored this summer, and citizens stop to remember that this place is well over 200 years old. A district in the west that celebrates its golden jubilee is thought very old; one that has a diamond jubilee is considered hoary with age. But we can prove that there were white settlers here early in the 18th century.

The first trading post in Alberta was built here, but all that is left of that historic old fort is the two chimneys and half a dozen cellars that Nature is gradually filling in. Eight years ago, the Historic Sites Society erected a cairn at the site and this summer, working with the local Board of Trade, they had the chimneys restored and repaired to weather another 200 years.

Three tribes of Indians make this their headquarters. Crees, Chippewas, both non-treaty, and the treaty Stoneys of the Kootenay Plains who refuse to live on the Morley reserve to which they belong. The chiefs tell you that their people have lived here since "God made the earth." Certainly, no legend of the tribe ever mentions them living anywhere else. They have been here over 300 years, records show.

The first heard-of Rocky Mountain House was in 1714 when the great-great-grandfather of the wife of the late John Norquay, fifth premier of Manitoba, was killed here and his wife and daughter carried off by marauding Indians. Later, the two women were rescued and taken back to Fort Garry.

From then on, Rocky Mountain House is mentioned regularly in stories of the west and in 1799 the Nor' West Trading company built a post here on the north bank of the North Saskatchewan river. The fort served as a supply base for the vast wilderness stretching west into British Columbia.

When the Nor' West company was looking for a site, they were glad to choose one where the two rivers meet, that had been used before by independent traders. From this spot, on the confluence of the North Saskatchewan and Clearwater rivers, they could look up both streams for Indian canoes, for the wild bush country was alive with hostile red men.

The first fort was a substantial affair, 120 feet square, with a 16-foot wall around it.

Those were the days when it took nearly 10 years from the time blankets and guns were shipped out from England until the Old Country traders received the furs in return. Ten years for one business deal!

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TRADING went on all winter, but the real business was done right after the spring break-up, when the Indians came down with their season's catch. When they made camp the night before reaching Rocky, the chiefs selected their choicest furs and sent them on ahead as a gift to the factor. He received the skins with due ceremony and in turn, made his preparations to meet the visitors. As soon as he saw them coming, he went out from the stockade with a barrel of whiskey and a big dipper.

The chief came first. He and the factor greeted each other with flowery phrases, then the chief accepted the dipper, and after drinking, passed it on to his braves. They left the squaws back at the camp.

After the dipper had been around a few times, trading became easier, but not many factors deliberately cheated the trappers. They realized that unless they were honest, the Indians would remember it after they left, and were as likely as not to come back and burn the fort down if they felt they had been cheated.

Most of the supplies were brought from Fort Benton on the Missouri river in Montana, 400 miles south of Rocky. Freighting had to be done overland, for no rivers run north and south, except the North Saskatchewan, which flows east out of the mountains, then at Rocky Mountain House, makes a sharp turn, and flows north over 100 miles to Edmonton. But it is so full of rapids that little freight was sent down from Edmonton. There was a certain amount of river traffic, but mostly in canoes that were lightly loaded.

The freighters had Red River carts and oxen and it took them at least 60 days to make the round trip to Fort Benton. Sixty days! No wonder supplies were high. It wasn't just a matter of loading up the cart and traveling until they reached their destination. Remember, there were no roads in those days, not even trails. There were half a dozen rivers to ford, many creeks and the last 70 miles into Rocky Mountain House they had muskegs to negotiate.

Think of unloading the cart, carrying the supplies on your back across the muskegs and rivers, then driving the team and cart over and loading up again. The freighter who didn't have to do this more than 20 times in one trip, was thought by his companions to have more luck than he deserved.

Readers may ask why the freighting wasn't done in winter when land and water was frozen. Some of it was, but it was easier to wade a muskeg in July than to camp on a snow drift in January, with the thermometer hovering around 60 below and a bitter wind blowing. Summer or winter, it was no job for weaklings.

For more than 70 years, Rocky Mountain House was the most westerly and most northerly post in the Blackfoot country and the main point of departure along the North Saskatchewan river west through the Howe pass.

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NOT only was this the first fort established in Alberta, but it was more than just a trading post, it was the winter camp of David Thompson, the explorer, for three winters, 1800-1, -2, and -7. On his journeys westward, Thompson came this far in the summer and rested here till spring.

Four tribes traded here: Crees, Chippewas, Stoneys and Blackfoot, and for some reason that no records state, the country was known for years as the Blackfoot country. The Blackfoot did not get along with the other three tribes, or with the white men. In the winter of 1819, they decided that they had a grievance against the traders. They held a council of war and made plans to sneak over to the fort at night, burn it down and scalp the white men.

Most fortunately for the traders there was an Indian, half Cree and half Blackfoot, who had been doctored by the factor and he chose this time to display the gratitude that is sometimes sadly lacking in both white men and red. He had been one of the party here with furs the spring before, and after the dipper had been passed a few times, this young brave became so jovial that he danced too close to the steep river bank and tumbled over. The bank goes down almost straight for more than 100 feet, to a stony level spot and the fall might easily have killed the foolish young Indian.

He got off with a broken leg and the factor and his men, perhaps feeling a trifle guilty when they remembered the whiskey barrel and dipper, took the victim in and set his leg. They cared for him till he was able to join his tribe.

When this Indian heard of the murderous plan of his chiefs, he slipped away unnoticed and warned the factor. There had been peace for a number of years and the traders had foolishly begun to think their troubles with the red men were over.

The fort was under-staffed, and without enough guns, and almost no ammunition. The only thing to do was flee. Before going, the traders buried as much of the supplies and furnishings as they could, including three cannon, and a keg of rum.

As soon as darkness fell, the factor and his men fled on horseback, over bush trails, to Edmonton. The Blackfoot arrived a few hours later and burned the buildings to the ground.

The Hudson's Bay company built the fort again in the spring. Late that fall, the Blackfoot tribe was completely wiped out by their old enemies, the Crees. The massacre took

Please Turn To Page 21—See
A Barrel of Rum

A Barrel of Rum

Continued From Page 19

place three miles south of the fort. The Crees didn't leave one of the tribe living, brave, squaw, or papoose, and from that day to this, there have been no Blackfoot Indians anywhere in the district.

Trading continued until 1875. By that time, furs were becoming scarce and the fort was abandoned. A bush fire burned the fort to its present skeleton in 1882.

Many other bloody battles were fought around the fort in the 160 years it was in operation, and farmers who plow those battlefields today are constantly turning up tomahawks, stone weapons, tools, bows and arrows, and now and then a rusty gun. Not many guns, though, for the Indian loved the white man's weapon and never parted with one as long as it held together.

Just last summer, C. E. Brierley, who owns the land on which the old fort was situated, was digging a well and four feet below the surface the men came on a layer of ashes at least two feet thick. Was the surface of the earth four feet lower here? And if so, what piled the earth up? We have very little wind, and until the last few years, the land was so heavily timbered that no wind could possibly drift the soil. No one can offer any explanation and the Indians look blank when asked if they have any legends that might explain such an odd discovery.

The Hudson's Bay company has a map that shows the location of the three buried cannon and last fall they sent a man in to try and find them. He hired a crew and they worked here for weeks, but not a trace of the cannon. The company reluctantly decided that the distances shown on the map must be inaccurate.

Citizens of the town watched the digging with interest, but they are really more concerned in the keg of rum buried near the fort! Rum aged over 100 years! Parties often go out from town and dig around the fort, but so far, no one has had any more luck than the Hudson's Bay company.

The location of the rum is not shown on the map.

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AFTER the trading post closed in 1875, there were very few white men in the district until 1904, when homesteaders began to trek in. Red Deer was well started by then, there were rumors of the railway going west, and the pioneers were in a hurry to get in on the ground floor. By 1907, there was a fair sized settlement of Ontario and Old Country homesteaders.

These pioneers were over 60 miles from the railway until 1910 when the railroad went through to Nordegg, 60 miles west, to tap the rich Brazeau coal fields.

Indians still roam around. They hold their pagan sun dance every summer, but even the Indian is becoming more business-like. They used to hold the dance at some spot that could not be reached by cars, to keep the white man from going out to watch the sacred rites. But the last three years, they built their lodge just off the main roads, and they charge 15 cents admission, or the equivalent in bread, butter or jam! If you go out without your purse, or an offering of food, you stay far back from the lodge!

Some years ago, the Canadian Pacific Railway company decided that Rocky Mountain House was far too cumbersome a name to print in timetables or on tickets, so they quietly undertook to change it to Lochearn.

The howl that went up must have been heard as far east as Ottawa, for every old-timer was justly indignant. The name means something, and what is there to an insipid word like Lochearn? They admitted that the three words make considerable writing, but they like them. The name links the present modern town with the days of the fur traders and explorers, it makes readers remember that this place, that looks like a new town, is well over 200 years old.

One of the few residents who was in favor of the change pointed out that the name is odd, to put it mildly. He cited an instance. His brother in New York City went down one day to send him a telegram and when the girl in the office read the address, she flatly refused to believe that there was such a place. In vain, the customer insisted that he had a brother living there, that he had had many letters postmarked Rocky Mountain House.

The clerk repeated that there simply could not be a town with a name like that, and she stuck to her guns. He had to call in an official before he could have the wire dispatched. Needless to say, it arrived without any difficulty.

Citizens here retorted that they didn't care if New Yorkers believed there could be such a place, or not; they intended keeping the name that had a history. They protested so loudly and long, that the railway company pretended that it was all just good, clean fun and that they had never really intended to make such a drastic change.

But for some years, the place was listed as Lochearn in the timetables, until that issue was out of print.

From a modern tourist camp in tall pines, you can look east to the busy little town on the hillside; or west across the river to the ruins of the old fort, now surrounded by prosperous farms. It is hard to believe that bloody battles were once fought on those fertile fields, that the history of the place goes back 225 years.